DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 266 463 CS 209 542

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TITLE One Way of Teaching Writing to 6 and 7 Year Olds.
INSTITUTION North Dakota Univ., Grand Forks. Center for Teaching and Learning.
PUB DATE Mar 86
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT Insights into Open Education; v18 n6 Mar 1986

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Assignments; Class Activities; Grade 1; *Learning Activities; Primary Education; Teaching Methods; *Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Helping first graders develop writing skills is the focus of this paper. The first part of the paper discusses 11 ideas likely to be crucial to any first grade writing program, such as the similarities between learning to talk and writing, and the teacher as the model writer. The second part of the paper outlines creative writing activities according to the nine months of the school year. An outline of seven concepts important in writing programs at all grade levels concludes the paper. (EL)

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CENTER FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA
GRAND FORKS 58201

Volume 18, Number 6
March 1986

One Way of Teaching Writing to 6 and 7 Year Olds

by Robert Andrews

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INSIGHTS into open education

One Way of Teaching Writing to 6 and 7 Year Olds

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The following article seeks to outline how I go about bringing first graders into the writing process. My methods for teaching writing have evolved over the last eleven years and will continue to do so as I gain in experience and knowledge, but it seems important for me to outline here my methods at this particular stage of my development. This brief discussion only indicates how I do it. Many of the things I do may be idiosyncratic and the same results could be accomplished in many ways, and the reader should be aware of this. There is no one correct way to teach writing, I am sure. Nevertheless, it is important for teachers consciously to try to guide children into the writing process, helping them develop further in each of their school years, and to be aware of a general progression of skills in writing, knowing what element is important to emphasize at a given time.

ELEVEN THOUGHTS

Before I talk specifically about what I do month by month to help guide my students into the writing process, I want to briefly put forth eleven thoughts on the whole process. These thoughts are crucial to me and, I believe, to any first grade writing program.

1. Learning to write for six-year-olds is very similar to learning to talk for younger children. In both cases it is a skill which they very much want to learn. Both processes require the learner to undergo a continuing experimentation with language and both processes require an audience for the necessary interaction to occur. In addition, both processes are exciting to observe because of the interesting ways children put together the bits and pieces that form the big puzzle of language. The two processes are similar in two other ways, important enough to separate into the next two points.

2. Children learn to talk by talking and receiving understanding. When the two-year-old says "Go store" we delight in the attempt at communication and accept it thoroughly, showing that we do understand by answering him and thus reinforcing his attempt at communication. Children learn to talk by using parts of language which they can duplicate and then by increasing the complexity of their patterns and vocabulary through more talking. If children only spoke for half an hour each Tuesday morning or, indeed, only during the mornings, they'd never learn to speak. So it is with learning to communicate thoughts through writing. It needs to be done often, almost daily, to be learned. We wouldn't think of having reading groups or math lessons only once a week, and writing is no less important. Daily writing is needed so that children will have enough chances to experiment and every piece of writing does not need to be a "gem." If writing is done only once a week, that bit of writing has to be

good and the child must produce or one of the few chances to practice is lost.

3. Another similarity between learning to talk and to write concerns correction and revision. We don't have toddlers practice talking out loud correctly to make sure they learn the proper forms because we know that given the proper language models they will learn practically all of the correct language forms by the age of five. We know that will happen. The children will not re-work their spoken sentences in formal ways, but they will revise their own language by listening, experimenting and talking further, a revision which comes naturally over time and in new situations. This same process will happen with writing. Students bring all the knowledge they have about language to bear on the writing process, not only the sounds and syntax of language, but an ingrained process of ongoing revision. The students' stories will get increasingly more complex, complete and proficient as the school year progresses with minimal formal input from the teacher as long as there are daily chances to write. Children bring themes and subjects from themselves about which they will write, each time revising and re-working this or that aspect, all done naturally with minimal adult input. This tendency, of course, changes as children grow. There will come a time when the natural tendency to experiment and grow will run its course and much adult input is needed for development in the later grades.

4. A fourth important aspect of a first grade writing program deals with self-expression. The writing of a six-year-old is more a personal statement than a public assignment. Often it is a caption for a larger event or feeling for which she or he does not have the skills to fully develop in words. This "caption" is a finished piece, not something to be re-worked. The six-year-old wants to move on to a new story--life is still too new and exciting to re-do old things. It is more art than work. A worksheet can be marked and corrected, but a story is a personal extension of the child and so must be treated differently.

5. A fifth principle that has guided my practice is the importance of spoken input as contrasted with written symbols. Because there is the sense of art about writing, because the writing of a six-year-old is experimentation with language, it should not be graded and marked the way we do worksheets and workbooks. The child's paper should remain unblemished by any of our marks and the child should be told the good aspects of the writing and the aspects that need work. Many comments can be given in a short amount of time and children do take them to heart.

6. I have found that the best time to give comments is often after the stories have been read out loud. This oral reading is not as necessary in the upper grades, but first graders thoroughly enjoy and desire to have all of their stories read out loud and I try to do this each day. We gather at the carpet, I hold up all of the stories and, depending on the amount of time available, either they or I read the stories. This becomes so routine that the days we don't get to the stories I get pestered about

them until we do read them. This is because the children quickly begin to write not just for themselves or for me but for the class. They learn a sense of "audience." Many children put humor in their stories and they wait all morning for the moment they can hear everyone laugh at their joke. I use this sharing time to praise those parts of the stories that are exceptional and mention those elements of which I would like to see more. It is amazing how closely the children listen to those comments and, the next day or the next week, incorporate those elements into their own stories. A class of children will write better, I am convinced, when they can hear each other's stories and they will use many ideas from each other's writing.

7. The seventh point concerns the teacher as model writer, another way of giving input. The teacher writes stories in front of the children to <u>model</u> the writing process. This becomes important to do mid-year, after the children have become fairly good at "writing down their talk." They then need to watch someone else write--not just hearing a story written by a teacher, but seeing and hearing it <u>being done</u>. Several times a week for two months I will begin the day by writing a story on the chart as the kids listen. I do not plan it out beforehand. I just begin to write. As I write I talk about why I am making the plot and word choices in my story along with the mechanics of writing such as punctuation. These stories are rarely gems, but that is not the purpose. They are a way of modeling the writer's craft, something far more easily shown than explained.

8. An eighth principle of mine concerns writing materials. From September through December I have the children write on plain paper because, in the beginning stages, children write longer, more elaborate, and more complex stories on plain paper. I discovered this by accident. Several years ago I used plain paper in the very first printing lessons and hence used it for creative writing as well. After I switched to lined paper for printing lessons, I did the same for the writing but the long, involved stories--full of exciting vocabulary and complex sentences--stopped. I was only getting "I like dogs. I like cats." When I mentioned this to a reading professor I knew, she asked if I had changed anything and I mentioned the change of paper. Her advice was to switch back. As soon as I did, the quality of the writing shot up again. I think this is because it takes so much concentration to carefully form the letters within the lines that there is little brain-power left for composing. Since I do not want to pass out lined paper and tell the kids not to worry about the lines, which would undo what I try to teach in printing, the best solution is to use plain paper. In January I make the transition to the nine-lined paper because by that time the children have established firmly enough the manual skills of printing. By February, the lines help with the composing process.

9. My ninth principle concerns skills, something we do need to be concerned about in writing.

Printing, spelling, punctuation and capitalization are all elements of the writing process and are conventions that need to be learned. What we must decide, however, is what the proper expectations for first grade should be. If it is true that the beginning writing process is akin to learning to talk, we must allow for much experimentation--which means "errors"--in the beginning of that process. I would submit that all of the first grade year is the "beginning" of the process, and that there should be no emphasis on any mastery of skills. Rather, we should look for growth and change over time. The children will have eleven more school years to master specific skills. First grade is a year to experiment.

10. This is not to say that we should not have expectations for students and that we do not hope to see some specific growth in their writing. We would want to see clear, legible printing and, by the end of the year, an ability to spell many words correctly and possession of good invented-spelling skills so that the words can easily be figured out. We would hope to see beginnings of understanding in the use of punctuation and certain writing conventions such as the use of the word "said" to indicate who is speaking when dialogue is being written. We look for growth, not mastery. We would also hope for more intangible, but important, results from a writing program. We would hope that, because of the daily routine of writing, the children would have no fear of the empty page, that they would be no more afraid of writing a story than they would of reading a book. We would hope that they would write at the level of their language skills and that, if they speak with a large vocabulary and with complex sentences, this richness would be reflected in their writing. We would hope that they would feel at ease with writing, and even enjoy putting their thoughts and stories on paper.

11. My eleventh point has to do with teachers. One reason writing is not done in many classrooms is that many teachers are not writers and feel uncomfortable with that process. They find it personally hard to do and hard to evaluate. Writing is often not easy to do--any professional writer has horror stories to tell about the empty page--but we need not be great writers to teach writing, any more than we need to be learned mathematicians to teach arithmetic. Every teacher can grow into having an effective writing program over several years as methods and plans are tried out and theories thought through. One must simply begin and then add as one grows. Finally, one must trust the children. Writing is a process they want to learn as much as reading. Even if we are not professional writers the children will write marvelous things if only they are encouraged.

CREATIVE WRITING THROUGHOUT THE SCHOOL YEAR

The second part of this paper outlines what I currently do each month with creative writing in a first grade classroom. Many of the

specifics change from year to year, but many of the activities I have done for ten years and will probably continue for another ten because they work for me. Other teachers will discover methods and ideas that fit their style of teaching and interests.

SEPTEMBER

During this month, my emphasis is a whole language approach where I integrate the reading and writing program. I do not begin the basal series during September, but work instead on many of the pre-reading skills and the high frequency words using language experience activities.

I spend 45 to 90 minutes each day in a language experience lesson that may involve various activities: discussion, drawing, sharing, reading (both by me and the children) and other such techniques. I do not have the children do the writing themselves, but I take dictation because the writing task is still too cumbersome for some children. I do not take down long dictated stories, but instead develop language experience activities where I can record a sentence from each child. Generally, I make those sentences into a class book that I ditto for them to read and take home. I am concerned with presenting writing concepts, the main one being that writing--at least at this stage--is "talk written down," and that what we say we can record and later read.

During September I begin printing lessons as practicing printing, thus training the muscles and mind in that manual task, an important element in being able to create written stories. Children cannot quickly and easily write down their thoughts until they have mastered the manual task of printing, and legible printing is important so that others can read their stories. All the skills we work on for beginning reading and all my own reading to the children lay the groundwork for learning how to write.

OCTOBER

Children begin writing their own stories in October and they are generally very ready. I begin reading groups in October and so need to have activities for the children to work on while I work with groups of children during the morning. I begin the writing process with the children, but after everyone has started I trust them to finish their stories on their own while I am with reading groups.

We write a story almost every day. I have always had the children choose their own topics as I have found that most children either know what they want to write on or can choose a topic within five minutes. Part of this readiness is due to the routine; they know a story is expected that morning and so they come prepared. There are also a number of special events and holidays from which the children can draw ideas. All of the children have their own dictionaries and I give each child one or two of the key words in their story. Somehow, they find stories easier to begin when they have several words that they know are "correct." From there the children use invented spelling (which I briefly explain), words hanging around the room (which we add to regularly), their dictionaries and help from their friends to write their stories. Some children eagerly begin to use invented spelling, using what they know about letters and sounds to write words as best they can. But many children are not comfortable

with this process yet; it is too big a leap for them if they are lacking skills, or confidence in the skills they do have, to sound out words. Nevertheless, these children want to write, and words hanging around the room, gathered as part of language experience lessons and reviewed often, will be used by them. They will walk around the room, find the words they want and arrange them in new ways each day to make sentences and stories. These children will move into invented spelling as their confidence and skills grow.

As I have mentioned, we use plain paper for writing our stories and each story is accompanied by a picture. At this stage pictures enhance the stories and often are used to tell parts of the narrative that the words do not. I am amazed each year at how quickly the children can write with great independence. Each day all of the stories are shared orally, usually in the afternoon. This sharing time is crucial to a creative writing program because it is the input and rewards time. You will not see dramatic growth if there is not sharing. This sharing time has become, over the years, my favorite part of the day.

NOVEMBER

I continue doing everything that I did in October, but expand as the children grow in what they can write. I put more aids around the classroom for the children to use when writing and I continue to encourage the children to use invented spelling as they are writing. I write language experience stories with the class and do some special work with nouns and adjectives to expose the class to language patterns that may carry over into their writing. We continue sharing all of the stories orally and I praise each day those wonderful "gems" that some of the stories contain in the hope that other children will utilize them in their own stories.

It is in November that I write our first factual story. This is always a watershed lesson--the stories after this point are generally longer and more complex. Prior to this, some children may not have written more than five or six-word stories. Because I want them to write longer stories, I do the hard part on this one--the spelling. The kids see that they can write long, complex thoughts. The subject of the story is the pilgrims. After reading about and discussing pilgrims for several weeks, I announce one morning that we are all going to write stories about this topic. Now this type of writing, since it does not come from inside them but is external, is hard to write so I need to help with the process, standing at the board and writing any word any child asks for. They do not have to worry about spelling so they can concentrate on composing. My doing the spelling also helps with ideas because the written words spark ideas in other children. We all write for 40 to 60 minutes. I encourage every child to continue writing past what she or he has ever done before.

DECEMBER

This is a growth month. Printing, invented spelling and composing skills have been somewhat internalized so that the children begin to experiment with new areas. Their printing is taking on individual styles and they can print faster. They have spelling vocabularies, with a number of words memorized, and are more comfortable with invented spelling. Because it takes

less time to write a story, the stories get longer. The sentences are also more complex and the pictures more colorful and detailed. The children are incorporating spacing, punctuation and capitalization into their stories although I have only taught spacing. They are using more resources to find words. I begin to phase out the daily printing lessons, stopping them by mid-December.

Let me say a word about work quality. It will vary greatly from day to day and among children. One needs to know one's standards and try to help the children work toward them. Within reason, a teacher must always urge the children toward growth and greater experimentation. Rather than looking for excellence each day, I look for overall growth over time. I see this growth because I save all of the children's writing at school. At the end of each month we pass out the writing, make covers and I bind the writing into a book. It becomes a part of our class library and is all sent home in May. It makes a wonderful collection of work for the parents to save and is a great record for me throughout the year of each child's individual progress. Going through the 250 collections of writing over the years is what has convinced me that writing is important to do with first graders. They learn and grow easily when given the opportunity.

JANUARY

This is a transition month. I move from using plain paper to using lined paper for the stories and I begin to have the children write different types of stories. About the third week in January we begin to write "Once Upon A Time" stories, stories that are fictional. I begin by writing my own OUAT stories in front of the children; the modeling of the writer's craft is explained in the first section of this paper. I gather the kids close to me at the carpet and I write at the easel. This is my story for the day, so I use my ideas and develop them as I want; I usually don't take ideas from the kids. In each story, I'll teach a different aspect of creating a story and reinforce many other concepts. If I want to teach that OUAT stories can be funny, I will write a funny story. If I want to show that stories often have repeating patterns, I will write that sort of story. I will always talk about how the writer needs to tell who is in the story and where these characters are in the beginning of the story, the need for action in a story and how a story needs an ending, usually telling what happened to the main characters. I do all of this as I write my story, explaining my craft as I go. After my story is done and re-read, I invite the children to write that sort of story if they desire to that day. The children will use the new concepts, though often not copying my story, and the very bright students will also pick up many new skills in punctuation from watching me go through the writing process.

After doing these each day for several weeks, I have the children begin writing OUAT stories on their own. During the month we work informally on: storyline and plot, setting, characters, having action in a story, beginning-middle-ends in a story, reality/fantasy, humor and the incorporation of personal experiences into a story. This informal input comes from my comments to individuals about their writing, brief lessons, examples and praise of good stories as we read them orally. It is amazing how many elements of effective writing the children pick up from listening to each other's work.

In place of printing I begin spelling lessons. Each week I work on a different group of words that share a common element, usually a vowel sound. I use games, dictation exercises and other activities to study words and the logical nature of spelling. I try to devise activities that make children think and apply, not merely copy. It is only then that spelling carries over into writing.

FEBRUARY

During this month I continue doing what we began in January, the OUAT stories, the spelling lessons and sharing all of the stories each day. I also write two more factual stories, on George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, following the same plan as we utilized in writing the pilgrim stories in November.

MARCH

Up until March the children have usually written a story that was finished in one day. By this time, however, the stories have gotten so long that they take a long time to write and it takes us too long each afternoon to read them orally. Thus, we again make a change to fit our classroom needs and also to serve as a bridge between the "caption" sort of story and stories that are critiqued and revised. We write stories that take several days to finish. I put together "books" (three sheets of nine-lined paper, folded in half with a cover) and the children choose their topics and begin to write. I limit work on a book to three to four pages a day to avoid getting rushed or sloppy work. Every day as I pass out the books I briefly comment on each child's progress. When a book is finally completed, it is shared. The children learn to carry a story over several days, to re-read what they have written, and to continue the story from their leaving-off point. The mere act of re-reading often influences them to make complex plot choices they might not otherwise have done. In first grade I do not work much with revision; that is a skill that comes later. To first graders life is still too new to go back and work on "old" things. Seeing all their errors corrected, even when done in a positive manner, often hurts. Thus, each book is finished, enjoyed and then set aside for the new effort.

I usually make some special hard back books and have an adult come in to do a dictation book using one of several good trade books as a pattern such as Brown Bear by Bill Martin, Jr.; The Important Book by Margaret Wise Brown; A Hole Is To Dig by Ruth Kraus; and The Someday Book by Charlotte Zolotow.

APRIL

During this month I continue the March activities with one addition--a special hard back book in which each child will publish one story. I choose what I feel is their best effort, proofread it and copy it for the child correctly in a scratch copy. The child then recopies the corrected version, in which I have changed only spelling and punctuation, into the special hard back copy. This procedure also allows me to keep the original copy. I do not keep much of the children's writings so this is a good trade-off.

MAY

I like to do a research project in May, usually as part of a study

on plants. I do a number of activities with planting seeds and observing plants so the natural thing to do is to write about what we've learned. I make up a book with special dittoed paper that has six lines with a plain space at the top. Each day for ten days the children study one aspect of plants such as roots or flowers, either by listening to a book or by seeing a film or filmstrip. We discuss the important facts about that part on the board and, after re-reading those words, the class writes a short report about that part and illustrates it with a picture. This project exposes the children to a different type of writing where one does not make up a story, but has to write about some learned facts and ideas.

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This ends my year of writing in first grade, but that does not end what a child needs to learn about how to write. Each grade level should guide the children into more complex areas of writing competency. I have, in this article, written primarily about first grade, but there are general aspects to this writing program that I believe should be present with writing at any grade level. These include:

1. A well thought-out progression of skills to be worked on throughout the year.
2. Time given often and regularly for students to write in school.
3. Much input given to the students on their writing, both in stimulating writing with creative input and helping in correcting errors and strengthening skills.
4. Time for students to share their work with other students. In the upper grades, of course, not everything will be shared orally, depending upon the type of writing.
5. Exposure to different types of writing--poetry, story-writing, non-fiction--both by reading these types to children and by having the children write them.
6. An atmosphere where growth in ability and creating interesting language is sought after and enjoyed.
7. An atmosphere where the students feel free to write from personal experience. "Story-starters" may be used effectively, but they should not be used exclusively. In the long run, better writing will come from personal experience.

The writing process for children must be taught by interested, concerned teachers.